

## As Shuts the Rose by PleaseDontGetMeRescued

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**Relationships:** Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair

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**Summary:**

This is what will happen this time, the same as every other: Max will curl up on her side, hide her face in the pillow, and try to block out the sounds of Billy sobbing himself to sleep in the next room. It won't work and Max will stare off into the darkness, awake and unsure of what to do, until the sun starts to shine through her bedroom window and her alarm clock goes off, telling her it's time to wake up.

As if she was ever asleep in the first place.

## As Shuts the Rose

### Author's Note:

I've apparently concocted the plague and this wouldn't leave me alone, so here you go. In other news, I know nothing about video games and am overly fond of using italics.

The title is from the poem "The Sandman" by Margaret Thomson Janvier.

Also, I've never read *The Hobbit*. Sue me.

The clock on Max's bedside table reads 3:37 a.m., but she isn't sleeping. She had been, for a short while, until the growling of alien creatures and the screams of her friends had echoed through the dark recesses of her brain, and she'd been jolted back into consciousness.

Now, she lies stone still on her back, heavy blankets pulled up to her chin despite the sweat she can feel pooling along her body. She knows, logically, that there's nothing in her room. The gate has been closed for months. And, even if there *was* something in her room, her blankets couldn't protect her. So, really, she might as well kick them down to the end of her bed, or at least stick one leg out from under the covers in order to feel the cool air. But she can't bring herself to do it.

So she lies still. Sweating, paranoid, exhausted.

If there was any chance of her getting back to sleep it is ripped away by the flicking of headlights through her blinds and across her wall.

Max's ears tune into the sound of angry muttering from downstairs, then the harsh sound of heavy footsteps across the floor towards the door. Outside, Billy's car door slams closed. The front door opens and the yelling begins immediately.

Curse words and angry shouts reverberate up the stairs, down the hall, and around Max's room. Suddenly the imaginary demodogs

aren't the scariest thing in the house.

Max curls onto her side and presses her pillow around her ears, hoping to block out the escalating noise. Billy's heavy boots stomp up the stairs and into his room. The door slams and for a single, blissful moment the house is silent again.

Max knows to revel in it while she can.

The sound of Neil chasing Billy up the stairs and banging his door back open is nothing in comparison to the sound of something heavy and expensive shattering against the wall that connects Billy's room to hers.

Max gasps, jolting up in bed and staring at the wall as if willing it to disappear. She doesn't know if she's terrified or desperate to have a glimpse into the goings-on in the other room.

Max knows what's coming next, but she flinches nonetheless when the harsh sound of skin against skin meets her ears. Max can practically feel the sting against Billy's cheek as if it were her own. The house falls silent for one second more before she can just barely make out Neil's deep growl of "you fucking disgust me," followed by the slamming of the door and more angry footsteps.

This exact sequence of events has happened more times than Max can count since she and her mom moved in with the Hargroves. Max knows her mother won't come into her room to check that she's alright or assure her that everything's fine. She knows that Billy won't stand up for himself, say something equally mean back to his father in the hopes that the tables might just turn this time. Max knows neither of these things will happen. Still, every time, she hopes.

This is what will happen this time, the same as every other: Max will curl up on her side, hide her face in the pillow, and try to block out the sounds of Billy sobbing himself to sleep in the next room. It won't work and Max will stare off into the darkness, awake and unsure of what to do, until the sun starts to shine through her bedroom window and her alarm clock goes off, telling her it's time to wake up.

As if she was ever asleep in the first place.

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Max's body is tired but her mind is moving a mile a minute.

School is unbearably long. In every class, Max struggles to stay awake. While most of her teachers are little more than annoyed, insisting that she *pay attention* and *focus*, Mrs. Boris in World Cultures had threatened Max with detention if she can't manage to keep her eyes open. Luckily, Lucas sits in the seat beside her and nudges her awake every time he sees her eyes start to droop.

When the final bell rings a tiny burst of energy rushes through Max as she loads up her backpack, grabs her board, and rushes out the double doors of Hawkins Middle.

The boys are lucky they get to ride their bikes home. Most of them live close by, an easy ride. But Max is forced to wait around for Billy to mosey his way out of the high school and drive her home, on the other side of town.

Most days the boys wait around with her until Billy decides to show his face. Today is no different.

The boys sit on the curb watching as Max fights off the exhaustion in her body to practice some simple tricks on her board. Ollies and heelflips were amongst the first tricks she'd learned. She can practically do them in her sleep, which is good considering how tired she is.

It'd be smart to just sit down on the curb amongst her friends and let herself rest a moment, but the boys are cheering her on and making impressed comments every time she lands another trick, and some stupid part of her revels in the attention. Her mom and Neil would rather Max not skate at all, calling it unladylike. Billy, ever the bully, would rather run over her board with his car than pay her any sort of compliment on her tricks. The only person who's ever cared enough

to be impressed is her dad. And well, he's not exactly around to see how much progress she's made. So sue her for wanting to show off to her friends a little.

She lands a kickflip with only a little bit of wobbling and Will asks, "how'd you learn to do all that?"

"Just practice. I used to take lessons in California, but then I stopped."

"Why?"

Because her mom couldn't afford it while trying to pay for the divorce. And then the wedding. And then the move. "No reason."

"What else can you do?" Dustin asks, intrigued.

Max arches an eyebrow, cocky. "What do you want to see?"

Dustin looks around for inspiration. His eyes light up and he points to the low set of stairs leading up from the parking lot to the courtyard. "Can you jump down those?"

"Uhhhh" Max trails off, calculating how hard it could be.

"*Dustin*," Lucas scolds, elbowing the other boy.

"What? I'm just wondering. Well, can you?"

"Have you ever done it before?" Mike asks skeptically.

"No, but how hard could it be?" And really, what's the worst that could happen? Max pushes off the ground and maneuvers her board towards the bottom of the stairs. She steps on the nose so the board pops up into her hand and takes the steps two at a time.

"Are you serious?" Mike calls as the boys all scramble after her, crowding around the base of the steps.

"Shouldn't you have a helmet on or something?" Will's voice is worried and quiet. He's always more careful than the others.

“Nah,” she says, backing up several feet. “I’ve got this.”

“Max, this is stupid. You’re gonna hurt yourself.”

“Don’t be such a worrywart, stalker.”

Lucas calls her name again, begging her to just *think* about this, but Max is already pushing off the ground towards the stairs, bending her knees, and *leaping*.

For a single, breathless moment she’s flying through the air. The wind pushes her hair back off her face, and her board hovers just below her feet before gravity can catch up. The ground is coming up fast and she’s so sure she’s going to land it.

Her wheels hit the ground and a wave of elation bursts through her as she thinks *I did it, I landed it*, but her feet are positioned all wrong and the second her full weight comes down on the board it flies out from under her.

When her vision clears she sees four worried faces leaning over her. The ringing in her ears won’t go away but she can make out the distinct shape of the words “holy shit” as they form on Dustin’s mouth.

Sound fades back in as Will asks if she’s alright, his brows knitted together in concern. Max groans as Lucas takes her by the arm and helps her sit up.

“That was dumb,” she says, pressing her fingers into the tender spot on the back of her head.

“Yeah, you think?” Lucas scolds, helping her to her feet.

“Miss Mayfield!” The shrill voice of Mrs. Boris rings through the courtyard as she stalks up to the Party and points her long, wrinkled finger in Max’s face. “What on earth were you thinking?”

“Sorry, Mrs. Boris,” Max grumbles, taking her board from Mike as he holds it out for her.

“Well, we’ll see how sorry you are in detention tomorrow.”

“Detention?” Her mind already spinning trying to come up with something to tell Billy. Or maybe that’s the blow to the head.

“That was reckless, Miss Mayfield. I thought you’d know better. Tomorrow,” she says, with one more scolding look. “After school.”

“What a crab,” Dustin mutters. “Tough break, dude.”

“Are you sure you’re okay,” Lucas asks.

“I’m fine,” Max replies, snatching her hand from his as she hears Billy lay on the horn from the parking lot. “I gotta go.”

She takes off without a backward glance. She shouldn’t be annoyed. It’s nobody’s fault but her own that she has detention. No one made her do the trick. Still, the exhaustion from her sleepless night combined with the persistent throbbing at the back of her head is putting her in a foul mood.

Disappointing the boys is the least of her worries.

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She studied for this test. She studied for it all night and well into the morning, in the car on the ride to school, between classes, at lunch in the library, every chance she got. She hasn’t even seen her friends yet today because her face is always buried in her notes. She is determined to pass this test. She has to, considering how poorly she did on the last one.

Spanish is not her subject. She sucked at it in California, and she sucks at it here; never mind that she’s in an easier section than the rest of the party. Technically, she could always ask one of them for help studying. Dustin is a natural at languages, after all. But asking for help would mean admitting she *needs* help, and that’s just not an option.

Now, though, she wishes she’d swallowed her stupid pride because

her mind is blank. Verb conjugations, vocabulary, sentence structures, it all flies out the window.

Panic starts to claw its way up her throat. She can't fail another test. While her mom normally just insist she try her best, Neil is far less understanding. And she's already on thin ice what with the detention after school.

Her ears are ringing and her head feels like a tv stuck on the wrong channel, all static. She flips through page after page of her test, scrambling to remember something, anything. She glances at the clock on the wall. There are only five minutes left in class and most of the other students have already turned their tests in. Max looks back down at her own test. Most of it is blank.

She wants to give up, to put her head down on the desk and wallow. But she's afraid that if she closes her eyes longer than it takes to blink she'll fall asleep and never wake up. How long has it been since she's slept?

With three minutes left in class, she scribbles down her best guesses, mostly nonsense, and gets up to slam her test on Señor Wilson's desk just as the bell rings. She ignores the pitying look her pins her with and stalks out of the classroom.

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In the hall, her mind is blissfully blank. She can't be bothered to linger on her failure in Spanish as she weaves her way through the crowds of middle schoolers towards her locker. The familiar motion of it all, unlocking her locker, searching for her math books, keeps her tired mind drifting, pulling her along as if she's caught in a riptide.

When Lucas' voice comes from behind her it's the best blessing she could hope for. "Hey MadMax -whoah," he mutters as Max spins and faceplants herself on his shoulder. She's not normally one for PDA,



and Lucas knows this. Still, he hesitantly wraps his arms around her shoulder and squeezes. “You okay?”

“Yeah, just,” she wraps her own arms around his middle and repositions her cheek on his shoulder. “It’s good to see you.”

She saw him yesterday after school. It hasn’t been that long, not even twenty-four hours. Still, with her tired mind barely working at a low hum it seems like it’s been ages.

“Yeah, you too,” Lucas replies, eyebrows pinched together in confusion. Max pulls out of his embrace and returns to rummaging around in her locker as the two-minute warning bell rings. “Hey, so I know you have detention after school, but the guys and I were thinking we’d hit up the arcade and you could meet us after?”

“Yeah, that sounds fun.” And it does. Max ignores the way her heart does a little leap at the idea of normalcy. Maybe a few hours at the arcade with the guys is exactly what she needs to get her head back in order.

“Do you think Billy would drop you off?”

Max’s mouth twists in minor annoyance. “Nah, he doesn’t want to wait around for me to get out. I’ll just ride my board there. It’s not that far.”

“If you’re sure,” Lucas concedes. Max shrugs and finally manages to pull her math binder out from the bottom of her locker. “Hey, speaking of, how’s your head? You hit it pretty hard yesterday when you fell doing that dumb trick.”

Max’s blood suddenly boils red hot. Dumb trick. Jesus, he thinks she’s an idiot, doesn’t he? Like she doesn’t know what she’s doing on her board. God, she’d like to see him try. He’d probably fall on his face and break all of his stupid teeth out of his head. And he’s going to stand there and lecture her? No.

“*Jesus*, Lucas, I’m fine. Just back off, would you. I’d like to see you try that trick.”

Lucas’ eyes widen at her harsh words and he throws his hands up in

surrender. “Whoa, okay. Sorry. I was just asking if you’re okay.”

“I told you I’m fine.” She throws her hair over her shoulder in annoyance. The loose strands have been itching her face all day. It’s driving her crazy. “Just leave it.”

“God, okay. I’m sorry.” A moment of tense silence passes between them. “How was your Spanish test?”

Max slams her locker closed so hard it practically vibrates. “Gee, Lucas, why ever do you ask?”

Lucas gapes. “I just know you studied really hard and-”

“And you think I’m an idiot who isn’t capable of passing a stupid Spanish test?”

“No! I just-”

“Whatever.” She rams her shoulder against his hard as she stomps past.

“Max,” he calls after her, mystified. She ignores him. And when she gets to the math class she shares with Mike, she’ll ignore him too.

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Detention drags on for what seems like forever. Max is just grateful she doesn’t have to do anything but sit there and force herself to stay awake. She’s heard horror stories about having to scrape gum off the bottom of desks only for it to fall in your hair or being forced to scrub marker graffiti off of bathroom stalls and inhaling so many chemicals it makes you dizzy.

Max is so tired she’s already dizzy enough, thank you very much.

Afterward, she walks to the arcade with her board under her arm. Riding seems like too much work. Putting one foot in front of the

other is easy, thoughtless.

The boys all greet her enthusiastically when she finally makes it to the arcade, except for Will who is focused on not dying during his turn of Dig Dug. Lucas meets Max's gaze sheepishly and she takes his hand, squeezing it in silent apology. He squeezes it back. *Apology accepted.*

Will gets crushed by a rock, signaling game over. The boys all make defeated sounds and Dustin steps in front of Will. "My turn!"

"You already had a turn," Lucas chimes. "Let Max have one."

Dustin makes a gesture of a whip being cracked along with the accompanying sound, but steps aside. Lucas mutters a "shut up" under his breath, but Max ignores them both and steps up to the game.

She does well enough through the early levels, dodging falling rocks and blowing up monsters, but her movements are jerky and her reaction times slow. It isn't long before she's used up her last life, and the *Game Over* message flashes across the screen.

She's nowhere near what her usual score is. The boys all gape at her defeat. Max gapes with them. "Let me try again," she insists, inserting another quarter.

"No way," Dustin cries, stepping in front of her. "It's my turn."

"I said let me try again! Get out of my way, nerd." She shoves him aside as the cheery music begins to play again and the character starts to burrow its way underground.

The game is over too quickly. She burns through her lives even faster than she did the first time. *Game Over* flashes across the screen again and Max grits her teeth, kicking the game console. Immediately her toe starts to throb.

"Hey!" Keith pops his greasy head out from behind the counter. "Careful with the merchandise!" Max promptly flips him off and Dustin shoves her aside again, eager to take his turn.

“Watch and learn,” he smirks, inserting more quarters.

And Max, much to her mortification, is forced to watch as her Dig Dug score is destroyed by none other than Dustin Henderson.

-

By the time Friday rolls around Max feels like she's losing her mind. Her brain is foggy, she can't focus on anything, she's snapping at her friends, going out of her way to instigate fights with Billy or Troy or anyone she can find. And on top of her irritability, she's jumpy, panics at sudden-moving shadows and jumps when people call her name unexpectedly. She's basically a zombie walking the halls of Hawkins Middle.

The boys notice her odd behavior - they'd have to be blind not to, but they don't say anything, simply sharing worried glances when Max isn't looking, afraid of igniting her already quick temper.

Steve, however, doesn't know any better.

Sometimes, when the Chief is in an exceptionally good mood the kids are able to guilt him into a sleepover. Or rather, El will beg and plead until Hopper relents under the gaze of his daughter's puppy dog eyes. Steve is just the lucky volunteer chauffeur.

The party piles into his car at the end of the school day and settle in for the long drive to the cabin. Steve lets out a long, low whistle when he catches sight of Max's tired expression and messy hair. “Rough night, carrot top?” Max punches him hard in the shoulder as she climbs into the backseat. “Ow, *Jesus*. More like ginger snap today, huh?” Mike and Dustin try to cover their snorts of laughter behind their hands as Max pins them with a deadly glare. “Alright, brats,” Steve says, shifting the car into gear. “Seat belts.”

Steve drops them off in front of Hopper cabin and waits for them to be let in before disappearing with a wave. Jonathan will pick them all up in the morning.

El answers the door with all of the enthusiasm that could possibly fit in her tiny body. She hugs Mike and holds on longer than would normally be socially acceptable from anyone other than her. She makes her rounds hugging Will, Dustin, Lucas, and finally Max. When she pulls away she pokes at the dark circles under Max's eyes. "Tired," she says, simply, matter of fact.

Max brushes her hand away gently. "Who's tired? I'm ready to watch Indiana Jones."

The boys all cheer and launch themselves onto the couch. Max moves to follow them but El grabs her hand and pulls her back with a concerned look. "I'm fine," Max insists, squeezing the other girl's hand. "Where's the Chief?"

"Out getting pizza." She pulls Max by the hand over to sit on the floor in front of the couch and uses her powers to levitate the movie from its box and into the VHS player.

By the time Hopper shows up with the pizza the movie is almost halfway over. The kids dig in with a ferocity only capable of six middle schoolers and settle in for a night of movies and easy camaraderie. Eventually, the sun sets and the kids spread out on the living room floor. One by one they drift off to sleep, but Max stays awake, huddled between Lucas and El, tired eye planted firmly on as the credits to *The Terminator* roll up the screen.

*Just go to sleep*, she urges herself. *Please, please, please just go to sleep.*

The creaking of floorboards sound behind her, and she launches up into a sitting position. "Sorry, kid," Hopper says, tiptoeing around the kids to get at the tv and turn it off. "Didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't," Max concedes blearily, rubbing her eyes.

"Well, get some sleep. It's almost one."

Max nods her head and rolls over, pressing her forehead into El's shoulder blades and feeling Lucas's warmth behind her. She hears Hopper moving through the cabin, first to the kitchen where the sink runs for only a moment, and then to his room. A few minutes later

the light from under the crack in the door goes out and the house is silent except for the ticking of the clock above the tv.

Max lies perfectly still. She's not comfortable. Lucas' knees are pushing into her back and Will keeps tossing and turning from his spot on the other side of Mike.

Out here in the woods there is no traffic noise and no passing headlights. Everything is eerily silent and it's enough to make Max's heart pick up its pace and sweat to bead at her hairline. It's too quiet, like the eerie silence right before a lion lunges for its prey. The thought makes Max twitch.

Hours pass as the hands on the clock go around again and again and again. Max is too wound up to move, to sleep. Her mind is begging her to *just close your eyes, please, just sleep* but begging is useless.

The cabin settles, letting off an old groan. The wind outside has picked up and seems to rock the cabin to its foundation. The light from above the stove in the kitchen sends odd shadows skittering across the living room. *They're not moving*, Max reminds herself. But the longer she stares at the shadows the more she can make out treacherous shapes in them. Demodogs and Mind Flayers inching forward so slowly it's almost undetectable to the eye. Still, Max refuses to blink. She knows that the second her eyes slip shut, even for just a moment, the shadows will lunge at her, smothering her and sucking the air from her lungs.

Something skitters across the porch outside and Max is up like a shot, across the room, and into the kitchen, pulling the largest knife she can find out of the block on the counter.

She holds the weapon aloft, pointing it at the shadows she's so sure are closing in on her. Another sound comes from the porch and oh, god, it's a demodog. They didn't kill them all. There's still some left and they're here, at the cabin, ready to strike.

Max psyches herself up, ready to lunge for the door and fight whatever is on the other side. Her heart is beating so hard and fast she's sure if she were to look down she'd be able to see it through her shirt. Her lungs aren't capable of holding breath but it doesn't

matter. She has to focus, to kill whatever it is on the other side of the door. She has to protect her friends.

She flings the front door open and a burst of cold winds flies through the cabin. Behind her, Will calls her name blearily, confused. "Come on!" she screams into the whistling wind. She holds the knife out threateningly in front of her, daring the creature to attack. "*Come on!*"

"*Max,*" Lucas' voice cries from right behind her. She startles, swings, and only barely misses slicing him with the knife because El tugged him back and away just in time.

"What is going on out here," Hopper yells, striding from his room with a frenzied look on his face.

Something moves out in the woods again and Max scream, falling back into the cabin, knife held high. "They're here, they're here," she cries, eyes closed and knife swinging blindly. "*It's here.*"

"What's here?" shouts Mike, already positioning himself in front of El.

"Oh, *god,*" Max sobs. Something heavy and strong grabs her around the waist and pulls her into the air. She wails, kicking against her attacker madly.

"El," Hopper's voice shouts from too close to Max's ear. The knife is ripped from her hand and embedded in the wall across the room. Then, all of the lights in the cabin flick on and everything, even the wind, goes stock-still.

Hopper lowers her to the ground carefully, but her legs collapse underneath her and she falls to the floor.

She's immediately rushed by the rest of the party. Lucas plants himself firmly at her back, wrapping his arms around her in a tight hug. Will take one of her hands and El gets right up in her face to wipe away her still flowing tears and tuck her sweaty hair behind her ears.

"What happened?" Hopper asks incredulously.

"They're here," Max snuffles, pressing her face into El's neck, soaking her with tears.

"Who's here?" Mike asks, eyes wide.

"The demodogs."

"*What*," Dustin demands, eyes searching the room as if they'll pop out of nowhere.

"Max," Will urges patiently. "They're all gone."

"I *saw* them," she sobs. "I saw them in the woods."

"Alright," Hopper says, stalking back into his room only to reemerge with his service pistol and a flashlight. "I'll go check it out."

"I'll go with you," El says, pulling away from Max.

"*No*," Lucas pulls her more firmly against him and Will squeezes her hand tight. Mike gets up as if to follow after Hopper and El. Max's heart is in her throat. "Don't go," she begs.

"We'll be right back," El promises.

Max's face crumples and she buries herself in Lucas' embrace.

The trio is gone no longer than fifteen minutes. Max's sobs have died down to muffled whimpering. Her head pounds like a hammer against an anvil. Dustin brings her a glass of cold water and she chugs it down gratefully.

They see the light from Hopper's flashlight before anything else, and Max, Lucas, Dustin, and Will all perk up at the sight of it. "There's nothing out there," Hopper says matter-of-factly. "Must have just been a bad dream."

"No," Max insists. "I wasn't asleep."

The party falls still and Lucas squeezes her hand tight. "Why weren't you sleeping?"



"I-" She swallows her words down, ashamed that she can't even manage something as instinctual as sleeping. "I don't know I just haven't really been sleeping."

"For how long," Will presses gently.

"I don't know." She shrugs. "A few weeks. Maybe more."

"Max," El laments woefully.

"Maybe we should call your parents, kid."

"No, they'll just be mad. I promise I'll go to sleep."

"You can't force yourself to sleep, kid."

"I'll sleep," she insists. She pulls herself from Lucas' embrace and lies back down on the floor by the couch, pulling the blanket up over her shoulders.

The rest of the party looks to Hopper for instruction. The chief shakes his head morosely. "Alright, you heard her. Everyone back to bed." He goes about locking the front door and shutting off lights, making sure to leave the kitchen one on for good measure.

The party settles back into their places and Lucas presses her forehead close to Max's, holding her hand. All of the adrenaline rushes out of her at once and she's once again left an exhausted, feeble body, eyes drooping. "It's okay," Lucas whispers. "You can sleep."

And, god help her, she does.

-

Max isn't sure how long she sleeps for, but she wakes when the first rays of sunlight break through the trees and stream through the window. Her body aches something terrible but she forces herself up

off the floor and into the kitchen. She pours herself a glass of water and sits at the kitchen table waiting for the rest to stir.

Sometime later the chief emerges from his room. "Alright, kid?" he asks, pulling Eggos from the freezer and popping them in the toaster. Max nods but otherwise doesn't comment. Hopper works in easy silence, toasting a stack of waffles tall enough to feed six growing teenagers and one grown chief of police.

The smell of her favorite food must rouse El from her slumber because soon enough she fumbles her way blearily from the living room to the kitchen in order to dig in. Eventually, all the rest join, annoyingly quiet and adamantly ignoring where the knife is still sticking out of the wall.

By 9:30 the dishes have been done, the blankets have been folded, and the backpacks have been packed, just in time for Jonathan to pull up in the drive. The party takes turns hugging El and thanking Hopper for letting them stay. Max is the last out the door. El squeezes her almost too tightly as if she could absorb all of Max's pain and sadness out of her through hug alone.

When she finally pulls away Hopper is right there to ruffle Max's hair. "Sorry about last night," Max mumbles, ashamed. "And the wall."

"Don't sweat it. Just get some rest." Max nods and climbs into the backseat of Jonathan's car between Lucas and Mike.

Dustin is the first to get dropped off. He waves goodbye and hustles into his house, backpack bouncing against his back.

Next comes Mike. Nancy is out in the front yard entertaining Holly when they pull up, but Jonathan doesn't linger too much more than necessary.

"You're up Lucas," Jonathan chimes as he pulls up to the Sinclair house.

"Max too," Lucas says, pulling her skateboard out of the car after him. Max shoots him a confused look. "We have to work on that

project for Mr. Clarke, remember?”

No, Max hadn't remembered. The project had completely slipped her mind. “Oh right,” she says, climbing out of the car. “Thanks for the ride, Jonathan. See you later, Will.”

In the house, Mrs. Sinclair and Erica are baking cookies together in the kitchen. “Hi Max,” she calls cheerily when they come through the door, kicking their shoes off. “Lucas. Did you all have fun?”

“Totally.” Lucas snatches two cookies off the tray and hands one to Max. “We have to go work on our science project now.” Lucas grabs Max's hand and pulls her up the stairs after him.

The door to Lucas' room shuts with a resounding click. Max braces herself for the barrage of questions about her lack of sleep, but shockingly, Lucas seems to be keeping his usually curious nature in check.

“Alright,” Lucas says pulling his science notebook from his backpack. “I think we should reread our notes before we decide on our topic. You can sit at my desk if you want.”

Lucas settles himself comfortably on his bed, back to the wall, and starts to read his notes in silence. Max eyes him wordlessly, feeling strangely out of place. She's been in Lucas' room dozens of times, but this is the first time she's felt like an intruder.

She shakes the feeling away and settles into the desk chair to read over her notes. Downstairs she can hear Erica and Mrs. Sinclair moving around in the kitchen. Outside a sputtering car passes by on the street. A few houses down children are playing loudly in the yard.

Everything is too much. Despite her few hours last night Max still feels endlessly tired. She feels overstimulated. Her head is pounding, her skin feels tight, her back hurts, her limbs feel heavy. The room is silent but every scratch of Lucas' pencil on paper or sound from downstairs reverberates through her head like a cannon blast.

She reads the same sentence in her notes ten times. She feels like the

world is crashing down around her and before she can stop it tears pool in her eyes and slip down her cheeks. Thankfully, her back is to Lucas so he can't see her. She can feel her face scrunching unattractively and knows how red her face and eyes get when she cries. A sob builds in her throat and she presses her lips together hard to keep the noise from slipping out.

She's embarrassed enough already after the commotion she caused last night. She doesn't want Lucas to see her like this. Still, a whimper slips past her lips before she can contain it.

"Max," Lucas says with a sad, gentle voice.

"I'm fine," she says, waving him away and wiping her tears off on her sleeve.

"You're not fine. Come here." Max doesn't even pretend to put up a fight. She slides from Lucas' desk chair to his bed, curling up in a ball beside him. "What's wrong." She squeezes her lips together and shakes her head. Lucas holds her hand. "Come on. Tell me."

"I'm tired. I'm so, so tired but I can't sleep."

"Why?"

"*I don't know.* There's all this noise outside and in my head and when I do manage to sleep I have these terrible dreams and then I can't get back to sleep and I just stare at the ceiling for hours and hours and I just-" She's full-on sobbing now. Lucas wipes her cheeks gently and strokes her hair. "I just want to sleep."

"So sleep," he says, pulling the throw from the end of his bed up and around her shoulders. "I'll help you." He urges Max to lie down. He sits with his back against the wall and pulls an enormous book off his bedside table. "This," he says, opening the book to the first page. "*Is The Hobbit*. My dad used to read it out loud to me when I was younger and couldn't sleep."

"Oh, so it's his fault you're an enormous nerd," she teases, wiping the last of her tears away.

"Watch it, Mayfield. In case you haven't noticed every last one of

your friends is a nerd. That makes you one too.”

She groans, pressing her face into the pillow. “Ugh, don’t remind me.”

“Close your eyes. I promise this will help.”

Max closes her eyes and immediately feels Lucas’ fingers carding through her hair. She snuggles closer to his side and tries to tune out everything that isn’t his voice.

*“In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort...”*

Sooner than she ever thought possible, Max begins to waver in and out of consciousness. Lucas’ voice is even and calm, lulling her to sleep. The thought is almost giddy, but Max pushes the excitement down and latches on to the thread end of sleep instead.

When she wakes there will be projects to do and cookies to eat and step-brothers to avoid, but for now she has Lucas beside her, the soft blankets underneath her, and hours to go with nothing to do but sleep.